

## BECOMING THE PERSON YOU NEED TO MEET

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### OPENING WORDS

*Come Sit By Our Fire* ~ Jennifer Kitchen

Come sit by our fire and let us share stories. Let me hear your tales of far off lands, wanderer, and I will tell you of my travels. Share your experience of the holy with me, worshipper, and I will tell you of that which I find divine.

Come and stay, lover of leaving, for ours is no caravan of despair, but of hope.

We would hear your stories of grief and sorrow as readily as those of joy and laughter, for there is a time and a place and a hearing for all the stories of this world. Stories are the breath and word of the spirit of life, that power that we name love.

Come, for our fire is warm and we have seats for all. Come, again and yet again, come speak to me of what fills your heart, what engages your mind, what resides in your soul.

Come, let us worship together.

### STORY FOR ALL AGES

*Room in Your Heart* ~ Kunzang Choden

*(An old woman opens her door to many travelers. When asked how she makes room, a monk says that there is always room in your home when there is room in your heart.)*

### READING

*The Web of Blessings*<sup>1</sup> (Abridged) ~ Rachel Naomi Remen

It has taken me a long time to realize that I have an effect on the people around me.

Like many people, I suffered for years from shyness and a lack of self-worth. All but invisible to myself, I believed I was invisible to others as well and that my presence or absence had little or no influence on anyone...

Many people do not know that they can strengthen or diminish the life around them. The way we live day to day simply may not reflect back to us our power to influence life or the web of relationships that connects us. Life responds to us anyway...

...When Sara became ill many years ago, bulimia was not yet a household word. Filled with guilt at her uncontrollable behaviour, she was taken to specialist after specialist until someone was able to identify the problem as something more than teenage rebellion...

As she described it to me: "Rachel, I was just so ALONE, I could not stop myself, and at the worst of it I was not sure that it was possible to survive this... I remember thinking that somewhere there must be...someone who has been able to heal from it. If they could live, maybe I could too."

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<sup>1</sup> From "My Grandfather's Blessings"

...after many years of difficulty she somehow found her way through and was able to recover...

A few years ago, she was reading her evening newspaper and came across an announcement for a meeting of a bulimia support group. Sara is a middle-aged woman and has not suffered from this problem for many years, but the idea intrigued her, and she decided to attend a meeting... The desperately ill young people there touched her heart, and, while she felt unable to help them, she cared about them and so she continued going back. Other than saying that she had bulimia as a girl she had not revealed a great deal more...but simply sat and listened to the stories of others.

As she was about to leave one of these meetings, she was stopped by a painfully thin young girl who thanked her for coming and told her how much it had meant to know her. Her eyes had been filled with unshed tears. Sara responded with her usual graciousness, but she was puzzled. She could not recall ever speaking to this girl... As she drove home, she wondered how she could have forgotten something so important to someone else. She was almost home before she understood. Her husband, who met her at their front door, was surprised to see that she had been crying. "Sara, what is wrong?" he asked in concern. "I have become the person I needed to meet, Harry," she told him, and walked into his arms.

(You see)...Even when we do not notice, we become a blessing to others, simply by being as we are.

...An educator who is now happily married once shared with me a single incident that freed her to change her life. She had been living with a charming, highly-educated man who was physically and psychologically abusive to her... Over and over he told her that she had provoked him and brought the abuse on herself by her stupidity and her other shortcomings... She had become so diminished and uncertain of what was real that she had come to believe him.

All this changed on day on a street corner in New York City. As Elaine and her husband were standing at a crosswalk waiting for the light to change, she had looked across the street and noticed a building with exceptionally beautiful pre-war architecture.... "Look, Melvin," she had said. "Isn't that building beautiful?" Thinking they were alone, he had responded to her in the tone of absolute contempt that he reserved for their private conversations...

She had flushed with shame and fallen silent. And then a woman standing next to them, a complete stranger...turned and fixed him with a glare. "She's absolutely right, you know," she said with a strong New York accent. "That building IS beautiful. And you, sir, are a horse's ass." When the light turned green, this woman crossed the street and walked away.

It was the defining moment in the relationship, my colleague told me. Suddenly all was crystal clear. She knew then that she would find the strength to leave him...

To recognize your capacity to affect life is to know yourself most intimately and deeply, to recognize your real value and power, independent of any role that you have been given to play, or expertise you may have acquired. It is possible to strengthen or diminish the life around us in almost any role...(And) there is no role that absolves us of the responsibility to listen, and to be mindful that life is all around us, touching us.

## MESSAGE

### *Becoming the Person We Need to Meet*

Rev. Meg Barnhouse is a prolific writer of UU meditations and songs. As I prepared for this morning, I came across one of those meditations, "Speaking to the Locks,"<sup>2</sup> and what she wrote resonated with me. She wrote of the many ways we lock ourselves in, or out...motivated by fear and ignorance and apathy...and how the presence of those locks distance us from bending and growing...about how they keep us from speaking when we should not be silent, and from listening when we should not be talking.

One metaphor Barnhouse uses is that of car door locks, which reminded me of an incident in my youth. I had been allowed to take the family car to the city, some three hours away, and while there had reason to stop to see my Aunt June. June was a hard-living garment worker whose home was in North Minneapolis, a neighbourhood that had recently undergone a violent transition from Jewish to Black, and that had been ravaged by riots.

As I left my visit with her, she pleaded with me to lock all of my car doors. She insisted that it was unsafe, saying that someone with malicious intent would jump into the car if they could.

Now, I was a young radical who did not want to believe her. I thought she was being racist. I wanted to boldly take the risk of leaving my car doors unlocked as an expression of my unabashed solidarity with African Americans. And so, I drove away without locking the doors.

Within a few blocks, I had to stop for a red light, at an intersection where many young black men lingered on the sidewalks and strolled through the crosswalk jiving with one another. Anxiety began to rise up in me, and I surreptitiously eyed my car doors. Now, this was before the day of automatic locks; each one of the four doors had a knob, sticking up in full sight. It was also the era of wide cars with expansive bench seats. While I could casually raise my left arm to rest on the door, simultaneously pushing down the knob, to lock the other doors would have required a huge and obvious physical motion.

Beads of sweat broke out on my brow as I weighed my two options; to leave the doors unlocked, stick to my values and bear the possible consequences...or as quietly as possible, to slide my arms across the seats and quickly press the knobs down. I was a scared small-town teenager in the big city, and I didn't want to appear the inexperienced bumpkin that I was. AND, I didn't want to make anyone think that I thought they were someone to be afraid of

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/speaking-locks>

simply because of where they lived or the colour of their skin. I could have used some support in that moment.

Who exactly is the person we need to meet? Have you ever had an experience like those described in the reading Rosana shared a few moments ago? ...an experience some might describe as being touched by an angel? ...where someone passes through your life in the blink of an eye but still has a huge impact? Whether it's a complete stranger, or someone you would never have dreamed would be there for you, or a friend who you can always depend on, I hope that each of you has had many experiences of encountering the person who said or did just the right thing, just when you most needed it.

Let's assume that you want to pay that forward, and that you DO want to become someone like that, that you'd like to be the person you need to meet. How would you do that?

There is surely something of the golden rule in this...do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. You certainly could consider what it is that is most touching and needed in your life, and then give that to others. And perhaps you've also heard of the platinum rule, which says that you should do unto others that which they would like done to them. In other words, that you shouldn't assume that what you need or want is what others need or want, but rather might ask, and seek to understand, what would be most helpful to them, from their perspective, for their hearts and lives.

So, should this service have been titled, becoming the person THEY need to meet? If you were able to remember such an instance, think again of the person who was exactly who you needed to meet in a time of need. Weren't they the person YOU needed to meet? And not the person they themselves needed to meet? Because, of course, each of us has also, often, met the person we did NOT NEED to meet...the one who offered unhelpful advice, or said something hurtful, or made inappropriate assumptions.

I'm pretty sure that I don't believe there are universal answers to universal needs. I'm pretty sure that while I might identify a list of what is most important in showing up for one another, that you'd be able to add things to that list that I hadn't thought of...things I hadn't put on the list because those things weren't important to ME. Still, I do trust that our Unitarian Universalist principles can provide sure guidance toward becoming the people we need to meet. If Unitarians, as a group, can be said to believe anything, it is that our principles matter...that they have meaning and purpose in the living of our days, and in the living of our relationships.

So, looking at our principles through the lens of being the people we most need to meet, let me begin with the 7<sup>th</sup> and work back toward the 1<sup>st</sup>.

We affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. Perhaps the person we most need to meet, or the person we can be for someone else, would do

or say something to show that we are a sacred part of all that is...that our presence and our actions matter...that we have the power to bless, and help, and to heal precisely because of our place in this beautifully interconnected and interdependent web.

We work for a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Being the person we need to meet may be by acting for, or giving voice to, these most treasured goals...by standing up for peace, by serving the spirit of freedom, by working for justice...by living these values in a personal way on a real and daily basis.

We believe in the right of conscience and the democratic process. When and how could we affirm another's right to choose, or discern, or vote according to their beliefs? When and how can we encourage another to trust their own reasoning and intuition? Maybe someone needs a little reassurance. In doing so, we may well be the person they need to meet.

We support a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. So, not only do we serve the spirit of freedom, we also challenge one another to be responsible in their own search. And sometimes, this is just what is needed...to be challenged...to be questioned...to be encouraged to be responsible, for ourselves and for others.

We accept one another and encourage spiritual growth. I've long thought that this is a defining factor of our faith...since accepting one another is the natural counterpoint to a free search for meaning. If we are to encourage freedom of belief, then we also must accept the results of that freedom, a freedom that allows us to arrive at differing places and assumptions. We may need, others may need, to experience sincere acceptance, not only of their beliefs, but of the spiritual path they choose to walk.

We practice justice, equity and compassion in our relationships. Relationships, as we know, are based in reciprocity, and so, just as we must practice justice and equity and compassion, we are also in need of these things being shown to us. Being the person we need to meet means being people who seek justice, who demand equity, and who practice compassion.

Finally, our first principle...we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of each and every person. Personally I believe this is the most important way in which we can be the ones others need to meet (which is probably an indication that this is what I most need.) I've been wondering this week how I might more often, and more consistently, affirm worth in all, and what I've come to, for myself, is a renewed desire to act and speak in the most life-affirming, worth-affirming, ways possible...to be affirming of YOUR life in every way I can...the life of each of you, the lives of everyone that I meet, and affirming of my own life as well.

At the end of the reading from Remen's book are the words: "To recognize your capacity to affect life is to know yourself most intimately and deeply, to recognize your real value and power..." While I've said that we must pay attention to what another needs, truly, not a one of us, no matter how evolved or enlightened, is ever going to be capable of always being exactly

the one that every single person needs in every encounter. But what we can be, if we work at it, are people who appreciate our capacity to affect the lives of others. We can learn to trust that who we are, innately and authentically, is exactly what the world needs....not for every person in every moment, but because of we are the only ones who have the ability to be our own unique selves. And the world needs who we are.

Looking back, I know that locking my car doors cannot be directly associated with racially-induced paranoia. But I also see that the person I most needed to meet was not present as I waited, trembling and unsure, at that intersection in North Minneapolis. I needed a companion who acknowledged and appreciated my desire not to judge people based on the colour of their skin, or perhaps it could have been a passerby who recognized my youth and my fear, and who signalled for me to push down the knobs, giving me community-based permission to make that move. Or, maybe even, a stranger could have entered my life through those open doors, not to hurt me, but to bring me understanding and friendship.

I struggle with a similar tension today...wanting to be open, and wanting to protect myself. Perhaps you struggle with this as well. I want to be 'unlocked' and helpful, and I fear what that might require of me. I want to be the woman in today's story who has room in both her home and her heart, yet I safeguard my personal time and space. But placing fear and openness side by side, I must put a higher value on being a person who has space enough to see another's need and to offer who I am in service of that need.

I suspect that both 'angels' in today's reading were initially serving themselves. Sara went to the bulimia support group, not to help the young people there, but because of her history with the disease and her curiosity about what such a group might have offered her. The woman on the street corner may well have been speaking, not directly to the man next to her or in support of his berated partner, but indirectly to someone who had treated her with disdain and disrespect. Perhaps what she needed most was to hear her own voice of resolve and self-regard. But what each of them do exemplify is a willingness to step out and be present; to overcome doubt and fear in service of what is right and good, in service of healing and blessing, in service of that which is affirming of justice, and equity, and compassion, and life itself.

Rev. Barnhouse ended her written meditation about locks by saying that we are scared of all the wrong things, saying that our fears keep us locked away...silo-ed in homogenous experiences, and silenced when we most need to speak. Likewise our fears and locks can keep us from showing up, from the relationships that walk in through open doors, from being vulnerable enough to share our authentic selves, from risking being the person someone needs to meet. It may be as simple as taking a few extra minutes to listen. Or speaking a quiet, strong word in the name of justice. Or, paying attention to that insistent voice within that knows the irrefutable power of love.

As for me, I choose to be open, striving always to have enough room for doing or saying the most life-affirming thing I can think of.

We all need the people we need to meet. And sometimes that person is ourselves.

Blessed be. Amen.

**READING**                      *Some Came Here Looking for Solace*                      ~ Mel Harkrader-Pine

A reading for bringing this morning's service to a close:

- Some came here looking for solace.
- Some came here and gave it to them.
- Some came here seeking music.
- Some came here and gave it, joyfully.
- Some came here seeking laughter.
- Some came here and created it.
- Some came here seeking learning, growth.
- Some came here and provided it.
- Some came here looking for a sense of security, a safe haven.
- Some came here and provided it.
- Some came here seeking an escape from hectic lives.
- Some came here and enabled them to have it.
- Some came here seeking the joy of community.
- Some came here and created that.
- Some came here wanting to serve.
- Some came here and made it possible for them.
- We thank them all.

**CLOSING WORDS**                      ~ Howard Thurman

As you reach out to join hands, remember the power of your thoughts, words and actions to affect the hearts around you. Feel the room in this community...room for all who would enter...room that holds all possibility of providing just what you need...all possibility that you might be the one to provide what is needed.

I leave you with these simple, and powerful, words of Howard Thurman:

“Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it.

Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Go and be what the world needs. Amen. Blessed Be.